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ABSTRACT

This issue of a newsletter on perspectives of refugee resettlement presents views and advice from 20 former members of the Overseas Refugee Training program who are now working with refugees in the United States. Topics discussed in this issue of the newsletter include the following: (1) the feelings of former staff on the effects of training; (2) remembering students; (3) advice to new staff; (4) how to make the program better; (5) how working in the program helped prepare Southeast Asian staff for life in the United States; and (6) coming home. (VWL)

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From There to Here: Views and Advice from Former Staff

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by Donald A. Ranard

Is the training program making a difference in the lives of refugees? How can new staff members best prepare for their jobs overseas? What is it like to return to the U.S. after spending a year or more working in the Southeast Asia program sites? To find the answers to these questions, 20 former staff members of the Overseas Refugee Training Program who are now working with refugees in the U.S. were interviewed for In America.

Former Staff See Effects of Training

THREE times a week, Sandy Hunt, a former Cultural Orientation (CO) supervisor in the overseas training program at Phanat Nikhom, conducts orientation sessions for newly arrived refugees in Seattle, Washington.

These days, Russian Pentecostals are the biggest group, followed by Ethiopians and Indochinese. Like many Indochinese, most Russian Pentecostals have had little formal education or exposure to urban life or Western culture. But unlike the Indochinese, Russian Pentecostals don't receive language training and cultural orientation before they arrive in the U.S., and as a result, they have a much harder time in their initial adjustment to life in the U.S., according to Hunt. "Give them a form and they don't know which side is up," she said. "Taking a bus petrifies them."

In contrast, even B-level graduates of the program know how to fill out forms and are less intimidated by the transportation system. "Those who have been through the training program feel good when they see how much they know," Hunt said. "Some come to the first orientation and never come back for another session. They feel they can do it themselves."

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Most of the returned overseas training staff interviewed for this issue of *In America* are working with refugees in the U.S.—as teachers, trainers, counselors, and administrators, in public schools and in resettlement agencies. Their involvement in the overseas refugee program and their work with refugees in the U.S. give them a unique dual perspective from which to gauge the effectiveness of training.

In his work as coordinator of a job training program for refugees in San Diego, Steven Epstein sees a "phenomenal difference" between refugees who have been through the program and those who haven't. "I have two [untrained] ODPs* in my program, and after three months they still can't answer the question, 'What's your address?' Three months! They get lost in the city and don't know how to get help," said Epstein, who worked in Bataan from 1982–1985, first as a supervisor in a training program for assistant teachers and then as the coordinator of that program.

In an economy that increasingly demands good communication skills from workers, refugees who can't speak, read, or write any English are finding it harder than ever to find jobs, Epstein noted. "Employers really want employees they can talk to," he said. "Language is a barrier no matter how diligent or conscientious the applicant is. We had one student, a very smart guy, a mechanic, and he never missed class. But we couldn't place him—no English. If he'd had the 20 weeks of language training, we could have gotten him a job."

Jenny Jensen, who worked as a Work Orientation (WO) supervisor in Phanat Nikhom from 1984 to 1986, sees a difference not only in the language skills that program graduates bring with them, but in their attitudes toward work and welfare, as well. "Those Hmong who came before the training program started are much more dependent on the government," said Jensen, who works as a case manager in a Hmong mutual assistance association in Appleton, Wisconsin. "They see welfare as an acceptable lifestyle. The graduates can see beyond that."

In particular, Jensen noted a difference between Hmong women who have received training and earlier arrivals who didn't. "Those who went through the training program are more open to getting jobs and training," she said. "They see their own development as important to their family's future."

After six months in a simulated American school, PASS and PREP graduates are better prepared for U.S. elementary and secondary schools than their untrained peers, say former program staff now working in U.S. public schools. "The PASS kids are not so frightened or uptight about experiences in school—they're more assertive," said Valerie Haugen, who worked as an ESL supervisor in Bataan's PASS program from 1986 to 1988 and who now coordinates services to limited-English proficient students in the Rochester, Minnesota, school district. "The untrained refugees are shyer and don't know what's going on."

One benefit of PASS training that Grace Valenzuela, a former ESL supervisor at Bataan, has observed is that its graduates are able to enter ESL programs at a more advanced level than students who arrive with no previous English language training. "PASS students come ready to enter the intermediate level, often joining students who've already been here one or two years," said Valenzuela, ESL program specialist in the Portland, Maine, school system. "There are still gaps in their educational preparation, but it's amazing how much learning can take place in such a short amount of time." ⊠

*Vietnamese who left their country under the Orderly Departure Program, which under an agreement between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments allows Vietnamese approved by both governments to emigrate to the U.S. As of October, 1988, ODP Vietnamese no longer receive pre-arrival training, in order to accommodate the large numbers of Amerasians who appear to have a greater need for training.

Remembering their students

ON a cross-country trip from San Francisco to Boston last year, Jon Phillips, a former ESL supervisor in the Galang training program, stopped in Sioux City, Iowa to visit a graduate of the program. A small town in western Iowa, where the population is mostly white and protestant and the winters are bitterly cold, Sioux City is the unlikely home of a large and self-sufficient Vietnamese community. Most of the men and women are

working, many of them in a meat processing plant, and the children are doing well in school. The leader of the Vietnamese community—and the reason for Phillips' visit—was Nguyen Trung Chau, a Vietnamese graduate of the Galang program.

When Chau arrived in Galang in 1986, he knew very little English. "But he had the kind of personality that takes advantage of every opportunity," Phillips said. "Whenever he had the chance, he would practice English with the staff."

Two years later, when Phillips visited him in Sioux City, Chau was working as a bilingual aide in an elementary school, living with his wife and children in his newly purchased, 5-bedroom house. As a Vietnamese community leader, Chau had sponsored 20 refugee families to the area.

"When I first met Chau, he could barely talk to me," Phillips said. "Now he gives presentations to Americans on Vietnamese culture and the problems of refugees."

Like Phillips, many program staff can remember a particular refugee, someone whose exceptional motivation and progress captured their attention. For Carol Gordenstein, a former ESL supervisor in Bataan's PASS program, it was a middle-aged Cambodian woman, a single mother who led her seven children—three of them adopted nephews—out of Cambodia. For Jenny Jensen, it was a small, quiet Hmong woman who later began a women's support group in the Appleton, Wisconsin, area.

When Cathy Hindman Reischl, a former ESL supervisor in Phanat Nikhom's PASS program, is asked to recall an exceptional student, she remembers a shy, withdrawn Khmer boy with learning problems who showed up for his first class dressed in pink pajamas. "We named him 'The Beave' [after the character in a 1950s television comedy series, *Leave it to Beaver*] because he had this very earnest look on his face," said Hindman Reischl. "He was the neediest kid in the group—our impression was that he wasn't well taken care of at home." Soon teachers started paying a lot of attention to him—assigning him classroom duties, giving him extra help with his reading and writing—and after ten weeks, he had come out of his shell. "He became a lot more talkative and outgoing," said Hindman Reischl. "He really blossomed. At the end of the program, he was a different person."

Two years later in the U.S., Hindman Reischl, a training specialist for a multifunctional resource center based in Lansing, Michigan, was giving a teacher training workshop in a small midwestern city, when a teacher mentioned a Khmer student. "I had her take me right to the classroom," said Hindman Reischl. "And there he was: The Beave. He still had learning problems, but he was doing very well." Later on, Hindman Reischl showed some slides of the training program; one of them was a shot of the Khmer boy. "All the teachers in the audience recognized him," said Hindman Reischl. "He had won them over, too." ■

Advice to new staff

WORKING in the overseas training program is both a challenge and an opportunity for professional and personal growth. How can new staff be effective in their work and get the most out of the experience? Here are some suggestions from former staff:

Establish good interpersonal relationships

"In the camp, you really need to get along with so many different kinds of people," says Carol Gordenstein, a former ESL supervisor in Bataan's PASS program. "Yes, you need to be knowledgeable, but how you interact with people is most important."

The ability to work in a culturally complex setting is the key to living and working successfully in the overseas training program, several former staff members noted. "Don't be too domineering," advises Jon Phillips, a former ESL supervisor at Phanat Nikhom. "In Thailand, the social side is almost as important as the professional." Sandy Hunt, a former CO supervisor in Phanat Nikhom, urges newly-hired staff to "show an interest in Thai culture and learn the language."

Supervisors need to set clear guidelines with their Thai staff, says Jenny Jensen, a former WO supervisor at Phanat Nikhom. Jensen advises new supervisors to "set up clear roles for you and the teachers, with an understanding of what you can and cannot do for them. It should be clear that

you're not just a friend and co-worker."

The English language facility of Filipinos and their extensive exposure to American culture can disguise differences in values and attitudes, points outs Steven Epstein, former coordinator of Bataan's training program for assistant teachers. "There are real differences, and staff need to be sensitive to them, "he says. It was precisely these cultural differences that Valerie Haugen "struggled with most" during her work as an ESL supervisor in the PASS program. "It was difficult realizing how firmly I believed in the correctness and the sensibleness of my way, the U.S. way of looking at things, versus the Filipino way," she says.

Respect the competence of your Filipino teachers, advises Sue Reynolds, who worked as a supervisor in Bataan's PREP program. "I tell people going over how sharp the Filipino staff is," she says. "I warn them not to assume that just because English is their second language, the teachers will be substandard. The teachers are competent, experienced, and up-to-date in the field."

Get to know the refugees

One of the most rewarding experiences in the camp is the chance to get to know the refugees, their cultures, and languages, several staff members said. "That's what it's all about—these are the people you're here to help," says Gordenstein.

Nguyen Duc, a former CO supervisor at Galang, warns new staff not to get so involved in the complex intellectual challenge of creating a better program that one forgets "the purpose of the enterprise"—helping the refugees. Along the same lines, Somchai Latthitham, a former WO teacher at Phanat Nikhom, advises staff to "think about the refugees' benefits before your own."

Expect to work hard—find time to relax

Several staff members mentioned the intensity of working in the camp—and the importance of taking time off to relax. "I can remember working past nine o'clock every night my first week and wondering, 'Don't these people ever go home?'" says Jensen. Like many others, Cathy Hindman Reischl, former ESL supervisor in the PASS program at Phanat Nikhom, found that life in the camp was "intense and single-minded: no bills, no family, no chores, no other influences: Work was all-engrossing."

Given the intensity of life in the camp, it's important to find time to relax, several staff members say. "Take things lightly, and after five o'clock, stop working and take a break—spend more time learning about the refugees, get to know more people," advises Grace Valenzuela, a former ESL supervisor at Bataan.

Bring new ideas, but don't expect to change things right away

"There is a need to bring in people with a fresh perspective, people who are current," says Hoang Thi Huynh Trang, a former PASS counselor at Bataan. Michael DiGregorio, who worked in Galang and Phanat Nikhom, agrees: "Somebody new going over should take a hard look at what's happening here in the U.S.: the new services, the 'compassion fatigue,' the interest in amnesty students, the increasing number of services run by refugees themselves—all this needs to be conveyed to the camps."

On the other hand, don't expect to change things immediately, several staff members caution. "People come with a lot of enthusiasm, new ideas, and there's a temptation to try to change everything," says Gordenstein. "But people need to stop and talk to others first and find out the history of the program."

Cathy Hindman Reischl cautions new staff members who have worked with refugees in the U.S. to recognize that their perspective, however valuable, is limited. "For some reason, when we were working on the development of the PASS curriculum in 1985, there were a lot of us from the Minneapolis/St. Paul area," she recalled. "We tended at first to base the curriculum on that experience, assuming that refugees would be going to a similar place, with lots of social services, community support, and so on." Her advice to new staff is to recognize that their experiences in the U.S. are limited and that the refugees' experiences are going to be very diverse.

—Douglas Gilzow

Suggestions from former staff

Making the program better

Asked what they would do to improve training, staff members offered suggestions that reflect diverse points of view in a number of areas.

The approach to teaching CO

Since the program began in 1980, Cultural Orientation (CO) staff have debated the relative value of various approaches to teaching CO: Should the focus be on the the presentation of information about life in the U.S. or should the approach be more one of exploring values and attitudes? Or should the emphasis be on developing coping strategies?

According to Court Robinson, the current mix of all three approaches in the program is "good, but not perfect." Robinson noted the danger of overwhelming refugees with too much information, much of which varies in relevance from region to region. "There's always the temptation to add information," said Robinson, recalling that in 1983, after some refugees died in San Francisco from eating poison mushrooms, it was decided that program should teach refugees about mushrooms. "Well, that was one of a thousand things that could go wrong," said Robinson. "We can't teach every single one of them. We have to establish a cut-off point, and decide what's really essential."

Several former CO staff thought that there should be more emphasis on coping strategies. "If someone can ask the right questions, they can get information," said Rick Spears. DiGregorio agreed, noting that with fewer social services targeted specifically for refugees in the U.S. and with increasing "compassion fatigue," it's more important than ever for refugees to be able to cope on their own.

One coping strategy that needs more attention, according to Grace Valenzuela, is the ability to make choices and decisions. "Even I have a hard time with that," she said. "Here, I'm always making more choices than I did in the Philippines. The presence of so many options almost paralyzes me sometimes."

Presenting a realistic picture

While several former staff members thought that the program presented an accurate picture of life in the U.S., others felt that the reality of refugees' lives in the U.S. is harsher than some aspects of the program present. Both Grace Valenzuela and Chan Bunyothin said that refugees need to be better prepared for the "increasing racism" which they say refugees are encountering in inner-city neighborhoods and schools. "Refugees need to realize that many of the Americans in the U.S. aren't like the Americans they meet in the camp," Valenzuela said.

Cathy Hindman Reischl noted that when she helped design the PASS program that she wasn't as aware as she is now of the problems refugees face in adjusting to urban life. "If there's a way, PASS should increase students' knowledge of the poverty and tough surroundings they may find themselves in," she said.

Another reality of U.S. life for which PASS graduates need better preparation is the pressures to reject their own cultural heritage and become "American," says Valerie Haugen. "I've seen refugee kids here with no identity at all," she says. "They just kind of float." According to Haugen, the program could better prepare the students for the reality of these pressures, while encouraging refugee youth to view their own cultures as a source of strength.

According to Steven Epstein, adult refugees need a better understanding of on-the-job realities. "Many still don't realize that working 8 to 5 is really 8 to 5, and that a half-hour lunch break is really only 30 minutes," he said. "I'm not sure that the camp can really do anything about this, but it is a big shock for many refugees." Jenny Jensen suggested that the WO program keep in mind the fact that many refugees don't get jobs during their first year in the U.S. "Some of the on-

the-job specifics get forgotten by the time they go to work," she noted.

In contrast, other returned staff thought that, on the whole, the training program presented an accurate picture of life in the U.S. According to Sandy Hunt, the CO curriculum portrays life realistically, but as in all programs, the classroom presentation of the curriculum varies somewhat from teacher to teacher. "Some teachers present it unadulterated," she said. "Others don't want to scare the students."

Meeting the needs of special groups

While staff members applauded the program's efforts to meet the special needs of specific groups, several thought that more attention should be paid to other populations, as well. Jenny Jensen would like to see more attention paid to the needs of *all* women, not just young mothers. "There should be more of a support system so they would see how to form one in the U.S.," she said. "With more mutual support, there would be more women working, especially among the Hmong."

Grace Valenzuela, on the other hand, would like to see support groups formed for men. "In some ways, men have a harder time in the U.S.," she explained. "They have higher expectations and are under more pressure. They aren't prepared to stay home and take care of the kids. Alcohol is a big problem among male refugees."

Steven Epstein recommended that more attention be paid to the needs of older refugees. "We should talk more about U.S. realities for older adults," said Epstein. "Even those over 55 are under pressure here to get employed. But they don't go through the program, and they're not prepared." Grace Valenzuela noted the need to address the problems of isolation among older women in the U.S.

Refugee participation

Several staff members suggested that the program do more to solicit ideas about the training program from students on a regular basis. Carol Gordenstein noted that in Bataan, refugees with advanced English skills had contributed to the design of their own training as assistant teachers. "It was great," she said. "People were really enthusiastic." Hoang Thi Huynh Trang suggested one way that the PASS program could solicit ideas from students: "After a cycle, form a task force of bright, concerned students," she said. "Ask them to present a report on what they liked and didn't like about training and how it could be better." ■

Former staff interviewed by *In America*

Chanida Bunyothin *Brighton MA: Mental health counselor for refugees;* Phanat Nikhom 1983-87 WO teacher

Mary Pat Champeau *New York City: Language school English program coordinator;* Galang 1985-86/Phanat Nikhom 1987-88 CO supervisor and trainer

Manley Daniel *Denver CO: Manager of Family English Literacy Project for Denver Public Schools;* Galang 1982-85 assistant program manager and program manager

Michael DiGregorio *Providence RI: Adult ESL literacy;* Galang 1983-86/Phanat Nikhom 1986-87 teacher trainer and curriculum/materials writer

Nguyen Duc *San Francisco CA: Contributing commentator (National Public Radio) and freelance writer;* Galang 1983-84 CO supervisor

Steven Epstein *San Diego CA: Director of Refugee Occupational Skills Center;* Bataan 1982-85 Assistant Teacher Paraprofessional Training Program supervisor and coordinator

Carol Gordenstein *Amherst MA: Elementary school ESL teacher;* Bataan 1982-85 and 1986-88 ESL, PASS supervisor and trainer

Valerie Haugen *Rochester MN: Coordinator of services to LEP students for Rochester Public Schools;* Bataan 1986-88 PASS ESL supervisor

Cathy Hindman Reischl *Lansing MI: Training and research specialist, Upper Great Lakes Multifunctional Resource Center;* Phanat Nikhom 1985-86 ESL and American Studies supervisor in PASS

Sandy Hunt *Seattle WA: Refugee orientation trainer;* Phanat Nikhom 1985-88 CO supervisor and staff trainer

Jenny Jensen *Appleton WI: Case manager at Hmong MAA;* Phanat Nikhom 1984-86 WO supervisor

Somchai Latthitham *Lowell MA: 1987-88 Counselor at Cambodian MAA;* Phanat Nikhom 1984-86 WO teacher

Jon Phillips *Brighton MA: ESL teacher at technical college;* Galang 1984-86/Phanat Nikhom 1987-88 ESL supervisor

Susan Reynolds *Wheaton IL: Adult ESL teacher;* Bataan 1987-88 PREP supervisor

Court Robinson *Washington DC: Policy analyst, US Committee for Refugees;* Phanat Nikhom 1982-85 CO supervisor and coordinator

Deborah Schaffer *Arlington VA: Adult ESL instructor;* Galang 1985-86 ESL supervisor

Rick Spears *San Francisco CA: ORR program specialist;* Phanat Nikhom 1984-85 CO supervisor

Sugeng Sukulono *Arlington VA;* Galang 1984-86 CO teacher

Hoang Thi Huynh Trang *Los Angeles CA: Graduate student UCLA;* Bataan 1986-87 PASS counselor

Grace Valenzuela *Portland ME: ESL program specialist in public schools;* Bataan 1980-84 ESL teacher and supervisor

Working in program prepared SE Asian staff for life in the U.S.

IN Somchai Latthitham's Work Orientation (WO) classes at Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp, students practiced workplace skills they would need in the U.S.—how to call in sick or late, how to speak up when they didn't understand or agree with something, how to make small talk with coworkers during a lunch break. Last year Somchai came to the United States and discovered for himself just how important these skills were.

"Working in the program really prepared me well," said Latthitham, who has worked as a job counselor in a Cambodian mutual assistance association in Lowell, Massachusetts. "I learned a lot about what it's like to work in the U.S."

Like Latthitham, a number of Thai, Filipino, and Indonesian staff from the overseas training program now working with refugees in the U.S. not only see the impact of training on the lives of refugees, but experience it themselves as they grapple with the challenges of adjusting to an unfamiliar culture.

Chan Bunyothin, a former WO teacher in Phanat Nikhom now working as a mental health counselor in Boston, credits the program for teaching her how to interact with Americans. "It helped me to be more assertive—to ask questions, confront others when I had a question, "she said. "I learned that it's OK to disagree and that you don't have to let things reach a point where you're so angry you have to leave."

Despite the preparation, some aspects of life in the U.S. surprised Bunyothin. "Life here is more difficult than I expected, especially for refugees," she said. "Housing is expensive, and in some neighborhoods, it's really bad—dirty and in bad condition. That surprised me. And there are more mental health problems than I expected. I don't think we realize how helpless many refugees feel, especially parents."

Bunyothin was also surprised at how many many refugees are isolated from the community at large. "It's especially true of those who came here before the training began," she said. "Even after all these years, many still don't speak English. They speak their own language." Their isolation not only their limits their opportunities, but serves to perpetuate some of the negative stereotypes that Americans have of refugees.

"I tell refugees to be willing to be different, to step out into the community," Bunyothin said. "I tell them, 'I know it's not necessary for your survival, but you will learn more if you take chances. It will lead to other opportunities as well as give you an idea of what Americans are like. And it's good for Americans to have contact with you so they will learn about Indochinese—and won't have such negative stereotypes.' "

Grace Valenzuela, a former ESL teacher and supervisor at Bataan now working in Portland, Maine, expressed surprise at the amount of racism in the U.S. "There's some feeling that there are too many Asians," said Valenzuela. "It's in the schools and it's increasing." Both Valenzuela and Bunyothin noted that in their racial attitudes, Americans in the camp are not very representative of Americans in the U.S.

For Sugeng Sukulono, an Indonesian who taught CO in the overseas training program on Galang from 1984 to 1986, the biggest surprise about living in the U.S. was how long it took him to adjust.

"The training helped me a lot," said Sukulono who now lives in Arlington, Virginia, with his wife, Deborah Schaffer, a former ESL supervisor at Galang. "But even though I worked in the training program for two years, and even though I speak English well and married an American and spent my first year in the US in a college town with a large international population, including quite a few Indonesians—even with all that, I had a difficult time adjusting. It's hard living in a foreign culture. And if it was hard for me, you can imagine how hard it is for a lot of refugees." ■

WO Teachers Visit Refugees, Worksites in U.S.

AFTER a three-week visit to the U.S., six Thai Work Orientation teachers have returned to Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp with more understanding of the realities that their students face in America. "It's true that refugees can achieve a nice life in the U.S.," said one teacher. "But it takes a lot of hard work."

The teachers visited cities with large Indochinese communities—among them, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. They talked to a wide range of people who deal with refugees—including employers, job developers, teachers, and MAA leaders—as well as with refugees themselves.

The teachers agreed that the training program is doing a good job of addressing refugees' most pressing needs. "Everything that we saw a need for, we include already," said one teacher. At the same time, the teachers said that, based on their experiences in the U.S., they will put a stronger emphasis on certain skills—how to discuss on-the-job problems with a supervisor, for example, and how to read schedules for work and transportation, as well as signs and instructions. One teacher said she will suggest spending less time on the comparatively difficult skill of reading a map and more time on the language needed to ask for and understand directions.

Based on her experience in the U.S., another teacher is going to suggest that Phanat Nikhom's restaurant simulation be altered slightly. "A waitress asks so many questions when taking an order for food—what kind of dressing, well done or medium, baked potato or fries, white or whole wheat bread," she said, adding that she planned to include these clarification questions in the simulation. ☒

This article is based on an interview with the six teachers by Mark Preslan, the WO coordinator at Phanat Nikhom. The teachers are: Rangrak "Aee" Keskowit, Hattaya "Ae" Pitakpow, Chureerot "Noi" Piromya, Pairin "Rin" Plykaew, Orathai "Jaew" Satukijkit, Waraluk "Ped" Chaokasem.

Coming

While some overseas program staff have returned harder coming back to their own country than it Southeast Asia? Here, returned staff tell what

Michael DiGregorio, Providence, Rhode Island

It was very difficult coming back. Your heart and your intellectual curiosity, the experiences you've had, the language and cultures you've learned—they're over there, not part of this society. On the other hand, it's helped that Providence has a lot of Southeast Asian culture.

One thing that made it hard was having to accept a decline in status and responsibility. Over there, I developed curriculum, wrote materials, did administration. To a lot of people here, what I was doing was something more like volunteer work—it doesn't transfer that well. While we've been gone, others have been building their careers.

A lot of things changed in the U.S. while I was gone. When I came back, I didn't have some of the technical skills in demand, like working with computers.

Court Robinson, Washington, D.C.

For me, it wasn't difficult—for several reasons. First, I've lived a lot of my life overseas—I've had the experience of coming back before. Second, I wanted to come back, and I had some idea of what I wanted to do. And I came back to work that was similar to what I was doing before. It must be more difficult for someone who wants to work with refugees back here, but whose only experience with refugees was over there. Also, I came back to Washington, a place I had lived before. It was familiar turf, and it's a cosmopolitan place where the kind of experience I had counts for something.

It helped that I came back with a partner—my wife, Ang. And the fact that this was a new culture for her meant that I had to serve as a cultural bridge. In the process, coming back became a more interesting experience as I saw the country through her eyes.

Home

from Southeast Asia and readjusted with little difficulty to life in America, others say that it was was going over. What is it like to return to the U.S. after living and working in a refugee camp in coming home was like for them.

Carol Gordenstein, Amherst, Massachusetts

It was very difficult. I came back and went to a town where I knew no one. The biggest problem was that I missed the close community of friends over there. In the Philippines, you're in contact with people all the time. I like to be with a lot of people; I like the sense of community and camaraderie. Here I have privacy—but it's too much.

When I first got back to the U.S., I had a feeling of being unconnected—nothing I did related to my past. In the camp I had a big key chain with all these keys to different buildings and rooms. I remember one day a few weeks after I got back, I was staying at my mother's house, and I took out my key chain. There weren't any keys on the chain—I didn't have a car or an apartment yet—and it really struck me that I was a person without a place.

I had a hard time bridging my life from there to here. One time, at a multi-cultural affair at school, I showed my slides of Southeast Asia. People stopped by afterwards, and they really seemed interested. For the first time since I came back, I really felt like this was who I was. I had a lot of information to offer. I felt like this was me—this was what was important to me.

Deborah Schaffer, Arlington, Virginia

It wasn't difficult. I was gone for only a year, for one thing, and there was too much going on in my life: I was going to school, I got married, and I got pregnant—all within the first year back. I didn't have time to have adjustment problems.

Valerie Haugen, Rochester, Minnesota

It was very difficult. It took me three months to get used to the pace here, where people don't take time for each other. (Now I've gotten used to driving fast and waiting impatiently in long lines like everyone else.) After three more months, I still felt like a refugee myself. You know that look of amazement that refugees sometimes get when they see Americans do something that strikes them as really strange? I found myself just as puzzled, staring at Americans' behavior as if it were completely alien. Even after eight months, when I began working here and supervising a staff of 18, I found that I was dealing with them in a Filipino way. I was never direct in my comments, always finding a roundabout way.

The hardest part was the isolation. Nobody here asked me any questions about what I had done. No friends or family were curious. It did help to talk on the phone with a friend who had returned from the PRPC the year before. You know, even a counselor wouldn't have helped because most counselors haven't been through that cross-cultural experience. I felt that I had given a lot, done my best in the camp, but then there wasn't any recognition or gratitude for my efforts.

Cathy Hindman Reischl, Lansing, Michigan

It wasn't too hard coming back. It was my third time back so I knew what to expect. And I had saved money, and this helped give me flexibility in selecting a job. Another thing that helped was that I had written a thousand letters of application two months before leaving and I came back to several interviews. I planned my return at a time that was appropriate for the kinds of jobs I wanted. And I went to places where I had friends. Of course, it helped that a romance was starting just as I was about to leave the camp—my future husband, just a friend then, came to visit me just before I left.

Nguyen Duc, San Francisco, California

It was very difficult coming back. I'll never forget, right after I got back, I went to a big opulent wedding. I went from Galang to this big wedding in San Francisco. Seeing people dressed so

well and with so much food, right after the refugee camp—it was hard to deal with.

You see, the experience in the camp had been very intense. It was surreal, actually. On the surface, everything was very normal—people going to school and church or temple. But it was very intense emotionally underneath—separation from family members, people lost at sea, a lot of tragedy.

When I came back, I couldn't stop talking about Galang, talked constantly about it for six months. Nobody could understand my experience. I was sure that I knew all the answers, since I had been there and they hadn't.

Sandy Hunt, Seattle, Washington

It hasn't been very difficult. I was financially secure so I didn't have to look for work, and I got married when I got back. I had a five-year-old son with a lot of questions about everything. And Seattle is an international city—it's rare that people aren't interested in what I did. Also, I had a real support network—a lot of friends and a husband who had worked for JVA in Thailand and who shared my experiences and interests.

Hoang Thi Huynh Trang, Los Angeles, California

It was difficult. It's difficult to spend two years outside the U.S. and come back to a place where hardly anyone will understand what it was all about. Only when I talk to people who worked there can I connect my past to my present. And although it looks good on a resumé, a lot of employers don't really understand what it means. It's hard to describe the experience. It was also difficult to see refugees' conditions over there and then come here and see a lot of luxuries.

Susan Reynolds, Wheaton, Illinois

It was difficult coming back. One reason was that I had such an intense experience in the camp. I was part of the startup of PREP, so everything was for the first time—policies, curricula, materials. And in camp we all lived in staff housing and there was a lot of community feeling and very warm, close friendships with people. I came back here to the suburbs, where you need to make an appointment three weeks in advance to visit a friend.

Rick Spears, San Francisco, California

It wasn't difficult. For one thing, I was gone for only a year. And I came back to the same office I had left. I came back to the U.S. on a Sunday, and the following Monday I was sitting at the same desk I had left a year before. There really wasn't time for culture shock. And I came back to a wonderful group of friends.

Steven Epstein, San Diego, California

It was very difficult. It was a lot harder than when I returned from Peace Corps Nepal. After Nepal, I went right into refugee work here, and that was OK. Coming back from Nepal, I just wallowed in the luxuries of the U.S.

But this time I was unhappy—moderately depressed. For one thing, I have a strong interest in refugee issues, and I would see how bad a shape the refugees were in here. Also I missed the intensity of the camp, the professional stimulation. And camaraderie is lacking here.

It took a year to get over that unhappiness—and there sure wasn't any honeymoon stage. Months after I got back, I still had close friends tell me I was doing things wrong. For example, some American friends invited me to a beach party, so I brought a carload of my Lao friends along—the more the merrier, like in Southeast Asia. And I thought we all had a really great time. Afterwards I was told that I had screwed up—that it wasn't cool to bring all those extra people.

Jon Phillips, Brighton, Massachusetts

It was a little difficult, but easier for me than it has been for others.

I had come back before and I knew how difficult it could be, so this time I had a plan: Visit family on the West Coast, buy a van, visit friends across the country, and end up in Boston, where I had a lot of acquaintances and where there were a lot of refugees. A Thai friend from Phanat Nikhom, had a place waiting for me in Boston. I just drove up to the house and moved in.

Even so, I went through stages. When I first came home, I felt really good—I had a job and I knew where I was living. But after a few months, I started to feel bad. I missed my close relationships in the camp, and everything here seemed a big hassle—commuting to work, parking spaces, car insurance, high prices, rude people. That feeling has lessened now. It still occurs on and off, but it's less often and less intense. ☒

Advice to returned staff

Just as there are ways to prepare for the experience of living in a different culture, so there are ways to prepare for the often difficult experience of returning to your own country, program staff say. Here are some of their suggestions:

Be ready to come home

"People have to make a real decision that they want to come home and not make the decision by default," says Michael DiGregorio, who attributes part of his re-entry difficulties to the fact that he wasn't ready to come home, but felt he had to for family reasons.

Hoang Thi Huynh Trang suggests that people take time to prepare themselves psychologically for leaving the camp. "First, take a few days and just walk around, saying goodbye emotionally to the camp," she says. "Then talk to someone there about leaving—wrap up the experience by talking about what you learned: what you expected, what you got and didn't get, your accomplishments and your disappointments."

Focusing on the positive aspects of coming home can also help, says Mary Pat Champeau. "It's another new experience," she said. "Tell yourself it will be exciting and fun."

Realize that coming home requires an adjustment

When you go overseas, "the new culture hits you in the face," says Manley Daniel. "You have to deal with it." In contrast, you don't expect to have problems in your own country. "It feels like the U.S. ought to be home," says Jenny Jensen, "but then it turns out not to be comfortable."

The first thing to understand about coming home, says Jensen, is that "it's normal to go through problem times during re-entry. You have to be patient, acknowledging even after six months that there are things you're not ready to tackle."

Plan your re-entry

"I learned a lesson from coming back before," says Jon Phillips. "I realized there was a real potential for floundering. So I promised myself that if I came back again, I'd have a plan. Long before I came back, I thought about what I wanted to do." For Phillips that plan included a cross-country trip that allowed him to visit friends in different parts of the U.S. and an eventual relocation in Boston, where there was a large Southeast Asian community and plenty of acquaintances.

Others lined up graduate school or interviews for jobs during their last months in the refugee camp. Several mentioned the advantage of coming back with some money. "That way you can afford to spend some time to get the job that you want," says Rick Spears.

Go to a place where you have friends

Having friends who will listen to you and give you support is critically important, returned program staff say. "If you're isolated, you can feel like you're going nuts," says DiGregorio, who suggests keeping in touch with other returned staff: "Pick up the phone and talk to someone. You'll find that others are having the same problems."

Go to a place with Indochinese or Southeast Asian communities

In addition to staying in touch with other returned staff, another way to maintain a healthy connection to one's recent experience is to return to a place with Indochinese and Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants. "As soon as you can, contact the MAAs and volags in your community and get involved as a volunteer," says Jensen. "It will give you a sense of continuity—and can lead to a job."

Being in Seattle has enabled Sandy Hunt "to integrate Thailand into my life," while in Lansing, Michigan, Cathy Hindman Reischl has managed to keep alive her interests in Thai language and culture. "I've even made money as a Thai language interpreter," she says. "Also, eating at a Thai restaurant every four weeks is crucial to my mental health."

Take some time off or jump back into the mainstream?

One disorienting aspect of modern travel is the abrupt transition from one culture to another: One day you're in Southeast Asia, the next day you're in Los Angeles. Jumping immediately back into the mainstream of American life can sharpen the shock of re-entry, says Hoang Thi Huynh Trang, who suggests a period of travel before returning to the U.S. Some respondents suggest that returned staff spend time in the U.S., visiting friends in different parts of the country before settling down.

Others caution returned staff not to lose any time getting back into the mainstream, however. "Have a job lined up to come back to right away," Manley Daniel says. "The worst part is languishing after the intensity of the camp."

Don't sell yourself short

"Returned staff have a lot to offer," says Court Robinson. "The overseas program teaches a lot—it teaches people how to act on their feet and how to deal in a complicated setting. These skills can transfer." Cathy Hindman Reischl agrees, adding, "Don't feel that you have to work with refugees. You have a lot of skills that apply elsewhere."

Stick it out

"Don't give up," says Court Robinson. "Eventually you'll find something worthwhile to do." Robinson warns about giving in to the impulse to turn around and go back overseas. "If you go overseas because that's really what you want to do, fine," he says. "But if you go back because you don't know what else to do, you may carry back with you a sense of defeat."

Finally, returned staff need to realize that the intense experience of working and living in a refugee camp can't be recaptured in the U.S., says Nguyen Duc. "The only way to recapture that experience is to go back," he says. "But if you stick it out, eventually your life here will be meaningful again. There is life after the refugee camp." ⊠

In America

Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

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